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THE 37TH BOMBARDMENT SQUADRON'S SERVICE
IN WORLD WAR II



by

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Preface

From 1992-1995 I was privileged to serve in the 37th Bomb Squadron as an Offensive Systems Officer in the B-1B at Ellsworth AFB, SD. About the time I got there, the Air Force was in the process of renaming a number of its existing squadrons to reconnect them with units that had a longer combat history. I noticed that the 37th was one that was not renamed, so I was curious about its history. I found out the unit was one of the Air Force's first having served in World War I (WWI), World War II (WWII), and Korea and played a part in the famous Doolittle raid over Tokyo. ACSC has given me a chance to dig deeper and, with the help of the resources of the Air Force Historical Research Agency, focus this paper on the unit's role in WWII.

I want to express my sincere thanks to Dr. Richard Muller for his encyclopedic knowledge of WWII and guidance on the development of this report. I am also grateful to my wife Monique, and daughters, Jessica and Jamie, for giving me the support and time I needed to put this all together. You three ladies are the light of my life.

Abstract

This is the history of the 37th Bombardment Squadron in World War II from 8 Dec 1941 through V-E Day in 1945. It outlines their contributions to the Allied campaign against the Axis countries. The squadron's participation in the famous Doolittle raid on Tokyo is examined along with a brief description of the planes they flew during the war, the B-25 and the B-26. The bulk of the report covers operations in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations including action against targets in Tunisia, Sicily and Italy. It concludes with a description of the unit's action in the European Theater of Operation against targets in France and Germany.

Origins of the 37th Bombardment Squadron

The 37th Bomb Squadron (BS) can trace its lineage almost back to the origins of the US Air Force itself. It began its official life as the 37th Aero Squadron on 13 June 1917 in the midst of World War I.¹ It was created as part of the US Army Air Service at Camp Kelly, TX, and after only a few months was transferred to France. During World War I, the 37th spent the majority of the war at the huge US training base in Issoudun, France, as a training squadron where US pilots learned how to fly front-line pursuit aircraft such as the Avro 504-K, Sopwith F-1 Camel, DeHaviland DH-4, and the Nieuport 27.² They were part of the 3rd Aviation Instruction Center commanded by Major (later General) Carl “Tooeey” Spaatz.³

During the inter-war years the unit was deactivated in 1919 and then later reactivated in 1933 as the 37th Pursuit Squadron flying the P-6 at Langley Field, VA.⁴ In the years leading up to World War II, the 37th was transformed first into a pursuit squadron, then into an attack squadron, then finally a bombardment squadron and relocated several times. At the time of the official entry of the United States into World War II on 8 December 1941, the 37th was flying the B-25 “Mitchell” medium bomber attached to the 17th Bombardment Group (Medium) (17th BG) and stationed in Pendleton, OR. The 37th remained a part of 17th BG for the entire war. The 37th had been flying the new B-25Bs since June 41.⁵ The 17th BG was the first operational unit to get production-quality B-25s straight off the assembly line.⁶

The B-25 “Mitchell” Medium Bomber

The Army Air Corps (AAC) in 1939 requested proposals from civilian airplane companies for a new medium bomber, designed to bridge the gap between heavy 4-engine bombers and

light fighter-bombers. AAC Circular Proposal 39-640 was intended to produce a bomber that would carry roughly half the fuel and bomb load of the B-17 or B-24 but fly faster.⁷ One resulting design was the B-25 “Mitchell” made by North American Aviation (NAA) of California. Ironically, the other was the B-26 “Marauder” which the 37th would also later fly. The B-26 scored much higher in the design competition but the War Department was so anxious to ramp up aircraft production across the board it awarded NAA a contract to produce 184 of its second-place design literally off the drawing board since a prototype had not been built.⁸ They went for the princely sum of \$64,000 each.⁹



Figure 1. The B-25B Medium Bomber

The B-25B had a normal crew of 5: pilot, co-pilot, bombardier, navigator and gunner. It had a 1,350-mile range with 3000 lb. of bombs and would cruise at 262 mph. A total of 120 “B” model B-25s were produced.¹⁰ The design would see many improvements over the course of the war and ultimately 9,934 of all Mitchell varieties were made, serving in each major theater of the war.¹¹

Combat Ready at the Start

When the US entered the war, the 37th immediately began anti-submarine patrols along the West Coast and the Columbia River Valley. In Feb 42 the squadron was ordered to transfer to

the East Coast to continue anti-submarine patrols and become a training unit to flesh out new groups for the rapidly expanding Army Air Forces. During the transfer process some of the men and planes of the 37th were diverted to support what was to become perhaps the most famous bombing raid of the war.

Doolittle's Raid on Tokyo

I fear we have only awakened a sleeping giant, and his reaction will be terrible.

—Japanese Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, after Pearl Harbor

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor there was tremendous desire among the American people to somehow strike back at the Japanese heartland. In the months that followed, a seemingly endless string of Japanese victories in the Pacific had the Allies on their heels and retreating across a broad front. President Roosevelt strongly desired at least a symbolic strike against Japan to help raise American morale and shatter the appearance of Japanese invincibility.¹² A plot was hatched to launch 16 Army B-25 bombers from a Navy carrier outside the normal range of naval aircraft and under strict secrecy for a surprise raid on Tokyo. The mission, it was hoped, would not only boost American morale and damage the Japanese leadership psychologically, but also force them to commit significant forces to homeland defense thereby reducing their ability to continue offensive actions.¹³ The tale has been well documented before but it is brought up here to highlight the involvement of the crewmembers of the 37th BS.

The 37th Contributes

*They were picked crews. They were the crews that had the most experience with the airplane, and, right from the start, they were absolutely top-flight.*¹⁴

--Gen James H. Doolittle

The mission was to be led by Lt Col James Doolittle and the crews and planes were to be chosen from among volunteers from the 17th Bomb Group which, at that time, consisted of the 34th, 37th, and the 95th Bombardment Squadrons and the 89th Reconnaissance Squadron. On 9 Feb 42 the group was ordered to transfer to Lexington Co. Field near Columbia SC. Word was quietly spread that volunteers were needed for a dangerous, highly classified “X Mission.” In late February almost all the members of the group volunteered without really knowing any details about what the mission would entail. The list was narrowed to 24 five-man flight crews plus maintenance personnel taken roughly equally from each squadron.¹⁵ Twenty-four of the group’s B-25Bs were modified with extra fuel tanks for the long flight to Tokyo.

Each plane would carry only four 500lb. bombs in a mix of incendiary and high explosive types. They planned to ingress at treetop level, attack at about 1500 above ground level, and egress at treetop level again. The top secret Norden bombsights, ineffective at low altitudes, were replaced with primitive, open sight devices.¹⁶ The navigators would use celestial navigation techniques over water after taking off from the *Hornet*. After hitting their targets the planes would land at an airbase in China held by Nationalist forces. The plan then was to quickly refuel and fly on to Chungking and use the planes there as part of the growing American presence in the China-Burma-India Theater.

The 37th BS contributed 3 of the 16 crews actually used in the 18 Apr 42 raid including the number 2 plane, flown by Lt. Travis Hoover, who was responsible for leading a flight of bombers against the targets in northern Tokyo.¹⁷ The other 2 crews were in planes number 12 (led by Lt. William Bower) and 13 (led by Lt. Edgar McElroy) which struck targets near Yokohama and the Yokosuka naval yard, respectively. All three 37th crews successfully struck their targets, survived the raid and eventually rejoined American forces in China.



Figure 2. Scenes over Tokyo taken by 37th Crewmember

Lt Hoover's crew struck two factory buildings in Tokyo then attempted to fly to the planned enroute refueling station near Chuchow, China. None of the crews found the refueling field since they arrived at night in steadily worsening weather instead of daylight as planned and the radio homing beacon they had hoped to use was never set up. As his plane ran out of fuel, Lt Hoover elected to crash-land his plane near the Chinese coast. It came to rest in a rice paddy and the crew was unhurt.¹⁸ They eventually made it to Chunking with local Chinese assistance almost a month later on 14 May 42.

Lt Bower (#12) and his crew reported being trailed by fighters but not fired on.¹⁹ Since they noticed barrage balloons over their intended targets, the Yokohama docks, they struck the Ogura refinery, a factory, and warehouse structures nearby.²⁰ This crew ran out of fuel just short of Chuchow and elected to bail out around 11,500 feet. The bombardier, TSgt Waldo Bither, had his parachute open in the plane just before bailing out. He quickly repacked it himself and jumped out. Only the engineer-gunner was hurt (broken foot) from the bailout and the crew eventually safely returned to Chunking.

Lt. McElroy's crew (#13) faced heavy flak coming into Tokyo Bay but pressed home their attacks after diving behind a hill. They struck their targets in and around the Yokosuka dry-docks, reportedly hitting a ship being converted to a carrier.²¹ Although each plane had been

outfitted with a special motion picture camera in the tail to record the bombing effects, none of them survived the mission. Thus the only pictures that survived the raid are those taken by 37th BS Navigator Lt. Clayton Campbell with a small personal camera belonging to Co-pilot Lt Richard Knobloch.²² This crew also successfully bailed out (the engineer-gunner again the only casualty: a leg injury) landing only three miles from Japanese forces in China.²³ They also eventually rejoined the rest of the group in Chunking with the help of Chinese soldiers. The injured gunner was carried in a sedan chair made from parachute straps.



Figure 3. Lt McElroy's crew on the road to Chunking.

Left to right: Sgt Williams, Lt McElroy, MSgt Bourgeois, and three unidentified soldiers. Photo taken by Lt Knobloch.

Although the 37th BS played a part in the most famous single bombing raid of the war, the war had just begun for the "Flying Lions." The next few months would bring a new mission, a new aircraft and the first of six combat stations that would see the 37th fight until the end of the war in Europe.

The 37th Goes to War

When the 37th transferred to South Carolina in February of 1942, it continued to conduct anti-submarine patrols this time on the East and Gulf Coasts. It also acted as an Operational Training Unit. By May 42 it was decided that since their group had lost so many planes on the Tokyo raid and didn't expect to get the surviving crewmembers back soon, the unit would switch to the new Martin B-26 bombers just starting to come off the production lines. The unit gave up its few remaining B-25s and transferred to Barksdale Field near Shreveport, LA on 24 Jun 42.²⁴ They continued their role as a training unit initially, training new crews to fill out other newly activated medium bombardment squadrons, after being checked out in the new B-26 themselves by factory representatives.²⁵ For the men experienced in the B-25 the transition was relatively easy but for a brand new pilot fresh from flying slower, forgiving trainers, the transition proved to be disastrous.²⁶

B-26 “Marauder”

One a day in Tampa Bay.

Two a day the Barksdale Way.

—Anonymous

Wringing out a new design

Baltimore, Maryland's Martin B-26 “Marauder” looked on paper like it would be a great plane. It came from the same AAC Circular Proposal that led to the B-25 but was different in many ways. The proposal had stressed speed as an important design consideration and the B-26 was certainly optimized for speed.²⁷ It had a streamlined fuselage as well as engine nacelles and a smooth, molded, nosecone versus the many-windowed nose of the B-25. Its skin was welded

together in most places to reduce drag vice the riveted B-25 skin and it had two bomb bays versus only one on the B-25.²⁸ Without a prototype the War Department ordered 201 B-26s in the fall of 1939 at a price of \$79,602 each.²⁹ They would have ordered more but Martin said they couldn't make any more than that since they were already busy building other bombers for the British and French.³⁰



Figure 4. The B-26B Medium Bomber

As a result of the initial design's short wings and other normal design flaws that could only be resolved after flight test, the bomber acquired a bad reputation. Almost as fast as some pursuit planes of the day and maneuverable, too, it required a lot of attention from its pilots. The plane had the most complex hydraulic and electrical systems in its class. The stubby wings gave it a high wing loading making it a "hot" plane to handle. It landed at around 130mph, much faster than the forgiving B-25's 80mph landing speed.³¹ Its short wings gave birth to such derogatory nicknames as "Wingless Wonder" and "The Baltimore Whore" (no visible means of support), while its accident record in training earned it names such as "Murderer" and "The Flying Coffin."³² In January of 1942, Lt Col Jimmy Doolittle, months away from his famous raid, was sent from Washington to the B-26 training bases to demonstrate the B-26's safety. He did things thought to be impossible in the Marauder such as single engine take-off and landings,

turns into a dead engine and, later, he even did a single-engine loop.³³ The doubters were convinced. Instead of discontinuing production, as some desired, training time was increased. Later models had increased wingspan and tail height to try to improve landing and take-off characteristics but other improvements increased weight at the same time, keeping the wing loading high.

The B-26 was designed to operate with a crew of seven but the 37th normally used only a crew of six: pilot, co-pilot, radio operator-gunner, engineer-gunner, tail gunner and an officer pulling combined navigator and bombardier duties. The “B-4” models the 37th was initially equipped with had a range of 1,150 miles with a typical 3000 lb. bomb load and would cruise at 260 mph.³⁴ The aft bomb bay was only suitable for light loads and was eventually deleted starting with the “C” models.³⁵ Eventually 5,266 planes of various models were produced and saw action in both the European and Pacific theaters of war.³⁶

Shipping out for North Africa

In Aug 42 it was decided the 37th would ship out along with the rest of the 17th Bomb Group to support the battle against the Germans.³⁷ Deploying a unit to Algeria in late 1942 was no simple task. The unit would consist throughout the war of an average of 80 officers and 250 enlisted men and usually only be commanded by a Major in those days. The planned northern aircraft ferry route across the North Atlantic had become too dangerous due to weather for medium bombers to attempt.³⁸ Thus the squadron was broken into three elements and used three separate means to cross the Atlantic.

An advanced echelon left 18 Sep 42 and traveled via the *Queen Mary* to Scotland, by train to England, and, after much delay and with their final destination still “unknown,” they arrived

by troop ship in Oran, Algeria on 6 Dec 42. They would reach the 37th's first duty station, Telergma Airfield, Algeria (a former Vichy French airbase), on 21 Dec 42.³⁹

The flight echelon left Barksdale on 5 Oct 42 to pick up new B-26B-2 aircraft in Ft. Wayne, IN, that were fresh from the Omaha, NE, factory.⁴⁰ They then flew them on the newly opened southern route across the Atlantic. The route included stops in Florida, Puerto Rico, British Guinea (Guyana), Brazil, Ascension Island, Ghana, Liberia, Gambia, Marrakech in French Morocco, and Algiers, Algeria finally arriving in Telergma on 21 Dec 42. The engineers and gunners were left in Brazil to save weight for the 1450 mile, eight hour flight to Ascension Island. They traveled via air transports later and were reunited with the advance echelon on 7 Dec in Oran.⁴¹

The ground echelon was broken into two elements, made up mostly of maintainers, and left Barksdale on 18 Nov 42. The first group departed the US on 12 Dec from New Jersey aboard the *Susan B. Anthony*, finally arriving in Casablanca, Morocco, on Christmas Eve, 24 Dec 42. The second group sailed on 14 Jan 43 and arrived in Casablanca on 25 Jan 43. The reunited ground echelon was unable to join the rest of the squadron until 3 Feb 43 after a 5-day train trip by cattle cars. By then the squadron had already started flying combat missions using other units' maintainers. All told the deployment process took almost four and a half months!⁴²

The North African Campaign

Telergma, Algeria (Dec 42-May 43).

After the US had officially been at war for over a year, the 37th BS would finally see combat in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations. Its first official combat mission of the North

African campaign was on New Year's Eve day, 31 Dec 42, against the Gabes airbase in southern Tunisia. They encountered flak and enemy fighters right from the start.

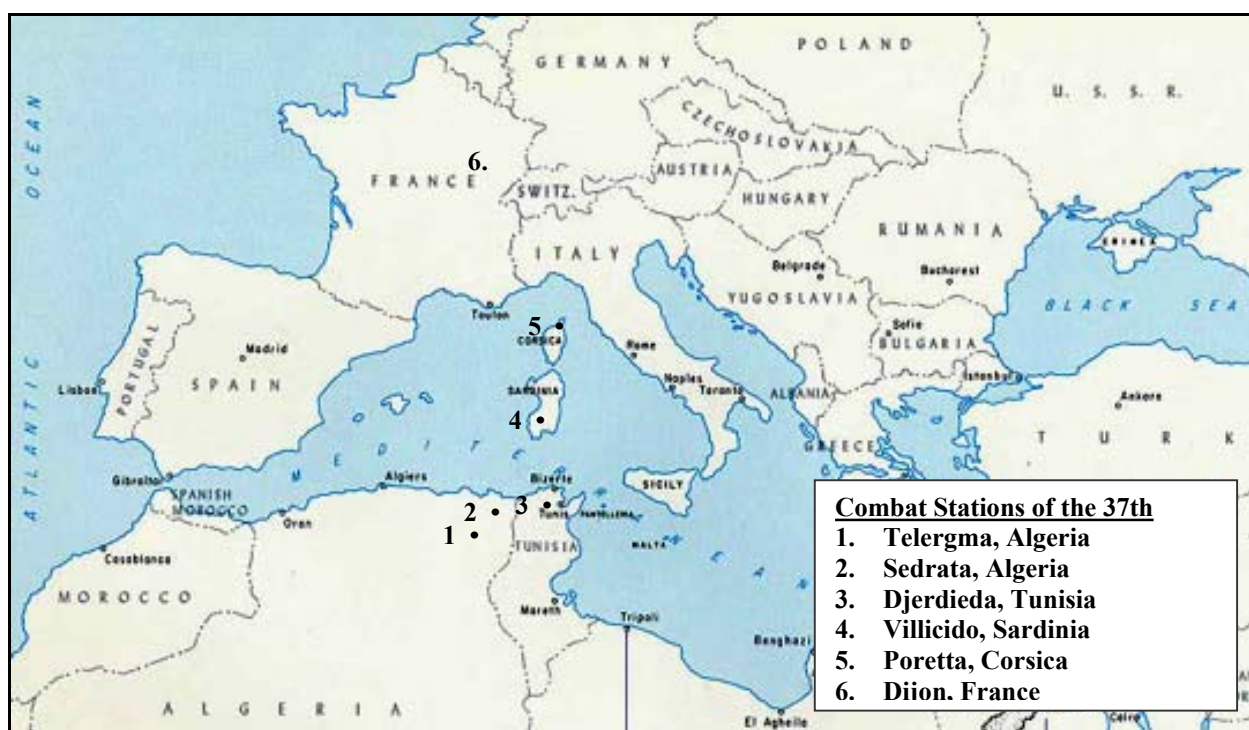


Figure 4. Map of Europe and North Africa During WWII

Tactics. The squadron had been trained in low level, formation bombing procedures in the States but initial operational experience in the theater proved that tactic was too dangerous.⁴³ B-26's were ordered to operate at medium altitudes (7,000-9,000 feet) for the remainder of the war unless there was little or no anti-aircraft artillery threat.⁴⁴ Only the lead ships were usually equipped with the Norden bombsights and the other planes in the box formation would bomb off the lead aircraft. Initial accuracy results of these daylight visual bombing missions were not impressive.⁴⁵ During this time the squadron would send 4 to 6 planes (although that number soon grew) to support of the 17th BG's missions, always flying with at least one other squadron. Mission types were usually limited to offensive counter air missions against airfields in Tunisia or interdiction missions against railroad marshaling yards and bridges or the ships and harbors

supplying the Italians and the *Afrika Korps*.⁴⁶ Weather at the home base or over the target would hinder operations for the entire war.

Life in North Africa. The living conditions at Telergma were primitive, to say the least. Enlisted men lived in pup tents pitched over their foxholes near the runway while the officers lived only marginally better, sharing pyramidal tents or former French stables.⁴⁷ The runway itself was only graded earth so in the rainy season it turned to mud; in dry conditions choking dust made operations equally difficult. Electricity was scarce and food centered around the famous C-rations.



Figure 5. Telergma Flightline.

Left: Maj Gen Doolittle (3rd from left) and Maj Bowen's (Sq/CC) Crew. **Right:** Capt Frymire and Capt Jackson

Operations. In North Africa the 37th was assigned to XII Bomber Command whose CO was a man many of them knew, Gen Doolittle. A number of the original Tokyo raiders were back with the 37th by then and a small reunion was held he visited them in Telergma. Gen Doolittle was once again proving the B-26 to doubters by flying one solo around the theater.⁴⁸ The 37th took part in 14 missions in Jan 43 but only 11 in Feb 43.⁴⁹ Included in the count was a mission on 24 Feb in support of the Allied ground battle at Kasserine Pass that was the 37th's costliest to date. Three planes were lost in an attack on the El Aouina airfield, two from intense

flak and one to an enemy fighter five minutes from the target.⁵⁰ The other 10 planes involved all had flak damage.

In Mar 43 due to bad weather the mission count shrank to only 10 at the cost of one crew and three planes (two crash-landed). Interdiction targets were still the focus of the attacks. The crews experimented with splitting the formations high and low against bridges and skip bombing techniques against shipping.⁵¹ April was even worse for the 37th as combat losses and maintenance problems took their toll and only 4 missions were supported.⁵² The ground war was being won, however, and squadron morale went way up on when Tunis and Bizerte in Tunisia fell 7 May 43.⁵³ With the Allies' success came word that the squadron would be on the move again to get closer to the next set of targets in Sicily and Italy.⁵⁴ The squadron moved between 10-17 May 43.

Sedrata, Algeria (May 43-Jun 43).

The first of many moves. Life in Sedrata was even worse than Telergma since there was even less natural vegetation, it was just as dusty, and water had to be rationed. They did enjoy, however, their first servings of fresh meat and butter since arriving in North Africa.⁵⁵ It was only now that replacement planes and air and ground crew began to trickle in.⁵⁶ Continuing operations almost immediately upon arrival, the 37th participated in Operation Corkscrew, the plan to take the small fortress of Pantelleria Island between Tunisia and Sicily.

An intense bombing campaign by medium bombers and fighter-bombers ran from 18 May to the garrison's surrender on 11 Jun 43.⁵⁷ Although a naval blockade had isolated the island and landing craft were inbound when word of the surrender was learned, since there was no blood on the beaches, Pantelleria was claimed to be the first Axis territory to surrender due to aerial bombing alone!⁵⁸

Fortunately for the men of the 37th, their stay at Sedrata was to be a brief one. To follow the advancing front line the squadron again moved with its group this time into newly captured Tunisia. There was little time to waste since the Allies next campaign, the invasion of Sicily, was to begin in July.

Djerdieda, Tunisia (Jun 43-Dec 43).

Life improves. The move into Tunisia brought improved living conditions but hotter weather. The squadron had plentiful water again and even had some olive trees as shade.⁵⁹ The enlisted men built a club around a bar obtained from Tunis. The officers built a mess hall and their own club that even had a concrete floor.⁶⁰



Figure 6. Scenes from Tunisia.

Left: The medical tent, squadron headquarters and briefing board. **Right:** Inside the 37th's Officers' Club.

Operations. The squadron supported the 10 Jul invasion of Sicily, Operation Husky, through pre-invasion attacks on defenses in the landing areas and post-invasion strikes against airfields to keep enemy planes off the beaches. Even before Sicily fell to Allied ground forces on the 17th of August, the 37th began attacks against Italy proper in July in preparation for the invasion of that country. They took part in the first daylight bombing of Rome on 19 July when over 500 planes struck targets all over the city.⁶¹

After months of aerial pounding Italy officially surrendered as an Axis country on 8 Sep 43, but by then the Germans had occupied the whole country so an invasion was still necessary. Operation Avalanche began the next day with amphibious landings at Salerno, south of Naples. Primary targets continued to include marshalling yards, against which 37th BS attacks were effective, and bridges, which were much tougher targets to hit accurately.⁶² When the Germans counterattacked on 14 September, the 37th flew multiple missions, from dawn to dusk, for three straight days to support the troops stuck at the beachheads.⁶³



Figure 7. 37th BS bombs on Alghero airfield in Sardinia.

While it is fairly well known that a B-17 crew had to complete 25 missions before it could be removed from combat, the magic number for a B-26 crew in North Africa was 40 missions (or reaching 38 years of age).⁶⁴ By the end of September a few original crewmembers reached the magic number and rotated back to the States. About this time the 37th lost its squadron commander, Major Audie Wright, in combat on a mission against bridges and road junctions near Mignano on 24 September. Jaundice and hepatitis epidemics raced through the squadron.

The effectiveness of the entire Group was beginning to wane and 6 October the group was ordered off combat status. Group and squadron leadership was replaced and the crews underwent extensive ground training and practiced formation flying. By the end of the month “everyone was eager for combat again” and the group returned to combat status on 1 November.⁶⁵

Weather was becoming a problem again, so much so that the 37th was unable to complete its next combat mission until the 12th of November.⁶⁶ Soon the ground war was pushing the front so far up the “boot” of Italy that plans were made to move the group again. The squadron had attempted to strike targets in Southern France (near their range limit) twice in this month but weather prevented it. The word came down their new home would be in Sardinia putting them well within range of Italian and French targets. The enlisted and officer clubs were broken down and transported along with the ground echelon of 125 men on 5 Nov 43 to set up the airfield before the planes arrived. Flight crews continued operations in Tunisia when the weather allowed through the end of the month.⁶⁷

Villicido, Sardinia (Dec 43-Sep 44).

Island Life. The new home of the 37th BS was an airfield outside the small town of Villicido on the south end of the island of Sardinia. Ironically, the 17th Bomb Group had previously bombed their new home station when the *Luftwaffe* was using it. The runway had to be cleared of shrapnel bits, craters had to be filled, and booby-trapped bombs left by the Germans had to be defused.⁶⁸ There were still wrecked German and Italian planes scattered about the area even as the 37th conducted its first mission from a base in Europe on 8 Dec 43, only three days after arriving.⁶⁹ Weather hampered much further activity until late in the month.

Rains turned the runway into a muddy quagmire and clouds usually obscured the targets in Italy.⁷⁰



Figure 8. Tent City in Sardinia.

In the course of the next 8 months the squadron settled into their new home and continued to support the conflict in Italy as the front moved slowly north. Squadron members pitched in together and hired unemployed local labor to build facilities for them and reconstruct their clubs. A nearby natural hot spring allowed hot water to be piped in for showers.⁷¹ Christmas meant no real respite to the deployed men of the 37th; they flew a mission on the 25th during a record 8-day streak of consecutive operational days. They did get to top the day off with a turkey dinner, served in the mess hall by the squadron commander as tradition dictates, followed by candy, cigars and whiskey.⁷²

Operations. Missions during this period were again against classic interdiction targets flown from medium altitudes. These included mainly railroad bridges, marshalling yards, and supply areas immediately behind enemy lines. The squadron supported the landings at Anzio, made attacks on Florence, Cassino and tried to disrupt supplies for the Gustav Line. They even engaged in some psychological warfare, dropping leaflet bombs over Italy in Jan 44.⁷³ Fighters were not usually a threat to them at this time. Most losses came about due to flak over the

targets or crash landings back home after being shot up. Losses however were down considerably and bombing accuracy up after the rough start in North Africa. A new tactic instituted by the Group Bombardier helped against the flak. The formation would begin its run about 1000' above the planned altitude, descend on the bomb run at about 700 feet per minute, level off for 30 seconds to drop, then continue to descend until off target.⁷⁴ On 13 Mar 44 for the first time the entire group scored 100% accuracy after photo reconnaissance showed all 96 bombers had hit within the designated 400' circle.⁷⁵ There would be several other "100%" missions to follow. The magic number of missions crewmembers needed to rotate home was raised in mid-February to 45 but it came with no guarantee. By March of 1944 with replacement crews so hard to get, the rotation policy was suspended indefinitely.⁷⁶ It would be July before significant numbers of replacement crews arrived so that the magic number could be re-established as 62 missions.⁷⁷

Rumors of an invasion of France from England began in earnest in April but they were not to be verified until June. The delay was detrimental to morale but steadily improving living conditions helped to offset the seemingly endless conflict. On Easter Sunday each man was provided one bottle of Coca-Cola, the first they had seen since leaving the US.⁷⁸ Prefabricated buildings were now available as quarters and a 1000-seat theater was built for USO shows and movies.⁷⁹ On 2 July 44 a 37th plane named *Jersey Bouncer* became the group's first plane to survive 100 missions.⁸⁰

In preparation for a possible invasion of southern France, the men began night training flights. Daylight raids in through July continued against targets in Italy but beginning in August the squadron focused on targets in France. After softening up targets near Marseilles and 340mm coastal guns around the port of Toulon earlier in the month, the 37th flew a record four

missions in one day on D-Day, 15 Aug 44 in support of the landings.⁸¹ By the 28th of August the front line had moved out of range of the B-26s so the 37th returned to striking targets in northern Italy. One such mission was against a railroad bridge north of Venice, over 1000 miles from base, which required an intermediate refueling stop in Italy on the way home.⁸² By month's end the 37th had flown a record 29 missions and 186 sorties in August 44.⁸³ The advancing fronts in Italy and France meant that once again the 37th would be on the move. Some rumors mentioned India, others Italy, but it turned out the squadron would be island hopping up the Mediterranean to Corsica instead. Bombing missions continued in September against railroad bridges and German troop positions in the Gothic line using frag and phosphorus bombs while the ground echelon moved out 16 September traveling between the islands via LSTs.⁸⁴ The planes arrived on the 21st.

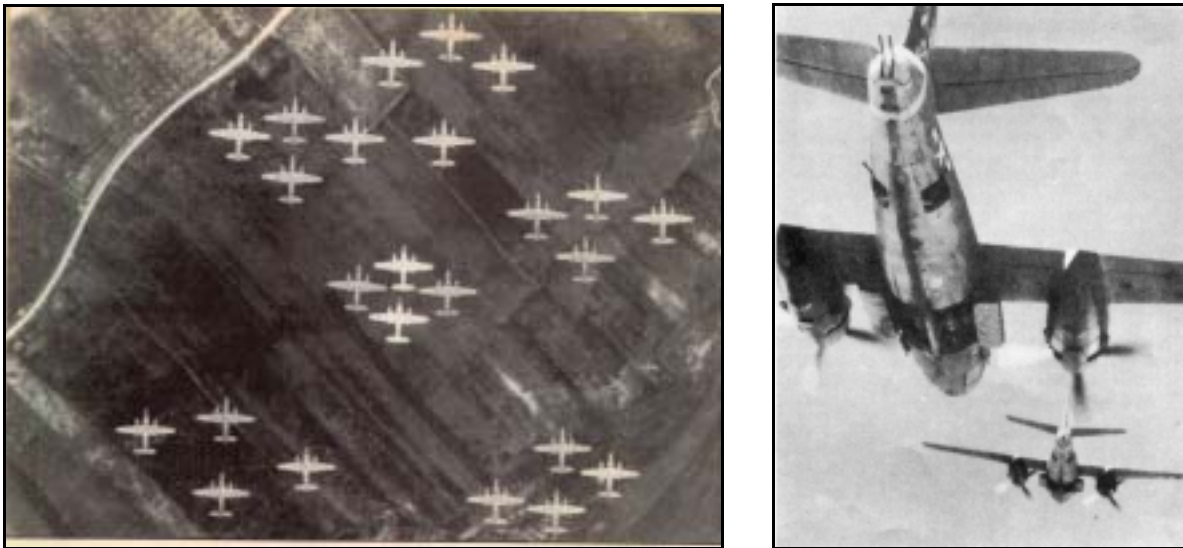


Figure 9. Formation Bombing.

Note the unique fold-up bomb bay doors of the B-26 in the photo on right.

Portetta, Corsica (Sep 44-Nov 44)

A thankfully short stay. The men of the 37th did not especially welcome the move to Corsica. The unit historian records that upon hearing the news morale “plummeted to a new

depth. It's a known fact that even Sardinia is an island paradise compared to Corsica."⁸⁵ The men had to leave behind their relatively established base and start over in tents with dirt floors again. Winds were much bigger problem here as well, sometimes reaching 60mph sustained with higher gusts that would blow tents over and pull roofs off more established buildings.⁸⁶ Mosquitoes were hungry and plentiful. The advantages though included shorter sorties (only 3 hours on average versus 5 hours) and the closest proximity to a town (9 miles to Bastia) of any base they had yet been. As usual there could be no let up in the operations tempo during the unit's move so the squadron flew its first mission from Corsica on 22 September, the day after its arrival, knocking down two spans of a railroad bridge near Palazzola, Italy.⁸⁷

Operations. Portetta airfield was at the northern tip of the island and served by a single 6000' long steel mat runway, too short for a fully laden B-26.⁸⁸ As a result, the planes had their nose and waist guns plus ammunition removed and the crews reduced to five by not flying with a waist gunner. The threat from enemy fighters had diminished considerably so this was a logical decision at the time.⁸⁹ Suddenly on 11 Oct enemy fighters reappeared necessitating the return of guns and gunners. Almost all losses at this time however continued to be due to flak. While on Corsica, the B-26s of the 37th continued to primarily strike targets in Italy to support the ground war there such as railroad bridges, fuel dumps, defensive positions on the Brenner line, and lines of communication between Italy and Austria.⁹⁰

The horrors of war were brought home to the ground personnel of the 37th on 20 Oct 44 when tragedy struck. That morning Gen Cannon had presented the Group a Distinguished Unit Citation but in the afternoon, after successfully striking a railroad bridge near Padua, a returning plane had a hung 1000 lb. bomb. On touchdown the bomb broke loose and exploded, scattering the runway with shrapnel, creating a large crater and igniting the bomber after shearing off its

tail. The pilot, Lt Jelinek, escaped unhurt then went back for the turret gunner who was badly burned. The other crewmembers could not be saved and the gunner died the next day due to his burns. The expedients of war being what they were, the runway was quickly cleaned up and repaired, and the next day a military funeral was held and operations resumed.⁹¹

Most of October was lost due to heavy rains and November brought with it rumors of another unit move. One of the 17th sister Groups, the 319th, was slated to convert to B-25s and transfer to the 57th Bomb Wing giving rise to the rumor that the whole 42nd Wing would transfer to the CBI.⁹² Instead the Group was ordered to join the 1st Tactical Air Force in France and relocate to an airfield outside of Dijon, just 75 miles from the front lines. An advance guard of four flew in on the 11th of November followed by two ground echelon movements once again via LSTs between 13 and 24 November 44. Many an airman became a seasick sailor on those storm-tossed LSTs.⁹³ The rest of the trip into eastern central France was made by motor convoy. The people of France were very excited to see them roll by and the men were happy to be in a place closest to the “civilization” they had left behind in the States. Thanksgiving on the 24th was rather lost in the shuffle. The planes and crews flew in on the 26th after completing their last mission in the Mediterranean Theater on the 20th against the Rovertto railroad bridge.⁹⁴

The European Theater of Operations

Dijon, France (Nov 44-Jun 45)

“Civilization.” Arriving in pouring rain the men set about pitching their tents once again, this time around the chateau at Bretennieres. The enlisted men again suffered with mud floors and no electricity in the tents at first but the officers were allowed to stay in the chateau, in private homes with host French families, or in the larger tents.⁹⁵ The former Luftwaffe airfield at

Dijon/Longvic had a welcome long concrete runway but it and the hangars around it were in need of many repairs due to Allied bombing. As a result, and partly due to weather, combat missions did not begin immediately this time but on the 1st of Dec 44 a raid into Germany was attempted. Clouds over the target turned it into a dry run.⁹⁶ The heaviest snowstorm in memory put a damper on further missions for a time.

A unique Trifecta. On 10 Dec 44 the 37th struck the Breisach railroad bridge across the Rhine near Karlsruhe.⁹⁷ It thus joined a select group of units to have attacked all three Axis countries, Japan in 42, Italy in 43 and Germany 44. Weather continued to severely limit attacks during December; of the 30 missions scheduled, 15 were canceled before take-off and another 10 turned out to be dry runs due to clouds in the target area. Targets included railroad bridges, a fuel dump and the “dragon’s teeth” of the Siegfried Line near Otterbach.⁹⁸ The sortie against the Siegfried Line cost the unit one of its best planes, the *Jersey Bouncer*, which had completed 130 missions. A mission on Christmas Eve proved to be very costly to the 37th. One plane having already been damaged by flak on the way to the Singen railroad bridge, it and two others were shot down by Bf-109s.⁹⁹ There was no mission on Christmas day, the unit’s third overseas since the war began. There was a turkey dinner however and it was repeated on New Years’ Day following a successful mission against German Army barracks near Kaiserslautern under beautifully clear skies.¹⁰⁰

In January 45 the 37th could claim only 2 successful missions, their lowest total of the war, when France was gripped for two weeks with sub-zero temperatures and much snow. Living conditions improved though as the mud froze under the tents and electricity was finally made available to all. Mess halls had been established indoors and trips to the city of Dijon were very popular. Morale took a hit late in the month when word surfaced of a new policy requiring some

ground personnel to be transferred to the infantry.¹⁰¹ Sure enough, in early February about 25 enlisted men transferred out and were replaced with mostly previously injured personnel no longer fit for the front line.¹⁰² Another large batch of replacement aircrews also arrived allowing those with over 65 missions to rotate home.



Figure 10. B-26s of the 37th over Germany, 1945.

February brought with it somewhat improved weather and the mission count grew to 12. No fighters were seen that month and flak seemed light.¹⁰³ The squadron managed three missions in one day on the 22nd in support of an ETO-wide effort to cut rail and communication lines in Germany including the Group's 500th mission.¹⁰⁴ The squadron then topped its old record by flying 30 missions with 217 mission in March. Included in that total was a maximum effort day on the 15th when the 37th flew 26 sorties on 6 separate missions to carpet bomb areas of the Siegfried Line near Zweibrücken in support of the 7th Army's drive there.¹⁰⁵

“Bat” Ships. Finally some relief from the frustration of weather over the target came in the form of “Shoran” radar sets installed in some aircraft. Three mission were completed on 18 March through overcast skies with the “Bat” ships leading the way but accuracy was impossible it assess quickly.¹⁰⁶ It was depended upon again during a raid on 24 Apr against a large ammo

dump near Munich.¹⁰⁷ The radar bombing technique was credited with extreme accuracy on the squadron's final missions in May 1945.¹⁰⁸

The end is near but the Luftwaffe returns. April of 1945 proved to be the most successful month of the war for the 37th. They went all out and managed to rack up 322 sorties during 33 missions including nine “100%” accuracy missions.¹⁰⁹ Targets became more tactical in nature as the front line collapsed around Germany and the unit went after minefields, gun positions and enemy strong points in support of the Allied infantry. Even a massive raid against Schweinfurt on the 10th was in preparation for the 7th Army's entry into that city.¹¹⁰ To better support the fluid front, some missions were flown with only a known control point to reach from which the formation would receive target information over the radio.¹¹¹ Eight missions were against targets in France as the Allies closed in on the German garrison around Bordeaux.



Figure 11. Tight formation tactics for self-defense and bombing accuracy

On the 17th of April the squadron had its first encounter with the German jet fighter, the Me-262. The Group was jumped by six of the speedy planes and two hit the 37th's formation causing some cannon damage but SSgt Timblin, a turret gunner, was credited with shooting down the squadron's first jet.¹¹² The jet had attacked from 7 o'clock low and was hit as it passed through 1 o'clock high when the Marauder's pilot dipped the wing towards him to give SSgt Timblin a

better shot. The jets returned on a mission on the 24th but the 37th came away unscathed. The Group returned to Germany the next day but this time with P-47 escorts that kept the Luftwaffe at bay.¹¹³ On the 26th of April the squadron lost a plane to a combined Me-262 and Bf-109 attack while claiming two jet kills of their own and a probable Bf-109 shot down. One other 37th plane was hit badly but crash-landed safely in France. Those were the last combat losses the squadron (and the Group) would suffer in the war.¹¹⁴

On 1 May 45 the 37th flew what was to be its last combat mission of the war—six planes struck gun emplacements on Ile d'Oleron in support of French troops trying to take Bordeaux.¹¹⁵ Any further sorties were prevented first by the weather, then by the rapidly advancing front that put all targets outside the range of the Marauders. Victory in Europe Day, celebrated on 8 May 45, came almost anti-climatically since it had been expected for some time. Following a tremendous victory parade in Dijon the next day, complete with a massive formation fly-by, the squadron's immediate worry was: what would happen next?

Epilogue

Postwar drawdown. Forty-eight hours after the big V-E parade in Dijon the unit was thrown into a rigorous training program to both keep them busy and keep them prepared in case they were shipped out to finish the war in the Pacific. At the end of May, however, almost all the planes and high-time aircrew transferred to another Group in Belgium. The remaining mostly enlisted personnel were transferred to Linz, Austria, and given “disarmament” duty.¹¹⁶ This included searching wide areas of the country in small teams looking for anything of military interest.¹¹⁷ After the war in the Pacific ended in August, more high-time men transferred out and by October the last groups were processed out. The squadron, along with the group were

officially inactivated on 26 Nov 45.¹¹⁸ Many of the unit's planes ended as part of the French Air Force after training by 37th members. The remaining B-26s were shipped to Landsberg, Germany, where they were blown up and scrapped.¹¹⁹



Figure 12. Surplus B-26s being blown up in Landsberg, Germany

Conclusion.

The 37th Bombardment Squadron played a valuable role in three major theaters of war against all three Axis countries. They served from the start of the United States' official involvement in World War II until its end. Although never part of the more famous Combined Bomber Offensive, they served courageously usually in direct support of their Army brothers by taking on interdiction and offensive counter air targets. The 37th was sheltered from the higher loss rates other medium bomber groups suffered since they spent most of the war in the Mediterranean Theater where the fighter threat was lower for them than in Europe or the Pacific. They adapted their tactics to the biggest threat they did face, anti-aircraft fire.



Figure 13. Flying home from mission over Italy with flak damage

The B-26 had a rough start, essentially learning many flight test lessons the hard way in the crucible of combat. There were numerous attempts to kill its production especially since the B-25 was more suitable than the Marauder in many ways (ease of operation, propeller ground clearance, and range). The B-26's superior bomb load, bombing accuracy and ruggedness helped keep it alive and the War Department simply found it needed large numbers of mediums and couldn't afford to shut the line down. The safety numbers improved dramatically over time and, in the end, the B-26 proved to have the lowest loss per sortie rate of any Allied bomber.¹²⁰

The role of the medium bomber is often overlooked in histories of WWII but for the 37th Bombardment Squadron the war was real and often deadly, and their efforts made a difference in the ground campaigns they supported. Their legacy lives on as the 37th BS today operates B-1B bombers at Ellsworth AFB, SD.

*We were whipped into shape and we were good. Oh, it was the greatest, wildest bunch of men that I have ever been associated with.*¹²¹

—Lt William Bower
37th BS Pilot

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Appendix A

Doolittle Raiders from the 37th BS¹

Photos taken aboard the USN carrier *Hornet*, April 1942.



Figure 14. Doolittle Crew #2

(L to R): Navigator: Lt Carl R. Wildner, Pilot: Lt. Travis Hooper, Bombardier: Lt Richard E. Miller, Co-pilot: Lt. William N. Fitzhugh, Flight Engineer-Gunner: Sgt Douglas V. Radney



Figure 15. Doolittle Crew #12

(L to R): Navigator: Lt William R. Pound, Jr., Pilot: Lt. William M. Bower, Flight Engineer-Gunner: SSgt Omer A. Duquette, Co-pilot: Lt. Thadd H. Blanton, Bombardier: TSgt Waldo J. Bither



Figure 16. Doolittle Crew #13

(L to R) Navigator: Lt Clayton J. Campbell, Pilot: Lt. Edgar E. McElroy, Flight Engineer-Gunner: Sgt Adam R. Williams, Co-pilot: Lt. Richard A. Knobloch, Bombardier: MSgt Robert C. Bourgeois



Figure 17. 37th BS Crewmember receive awards.

Left: Madame Chiang Kai-Shek thanks Doolittle raiders (L to R) Lt Roy Stork (89th Recon Sq), Lt Knobloch, SSgt Campell. **Right:** Gen “Hap” Arnold presents a medal to Capt Hoover while Lt Hoover waits. Gen Doolittle stands behind Gen Arnold.

Notes

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Appendix B

Examples of Citations for Medal Won in Combat¹

SILVER STAR to Lt. Oliver W. Jones, Bombardier

OLIVER W. JONES, 0663620, First Lieutenant, Flemington, Missouri. For gallantry in action. On many combat missions throughout the North African, Sicilian, and Italian campaigns, Lt. Jones has distinguished himself through his resourcefulness and determination. On 16 January 1944, upon the approach to the bomb run over the marshalling yards at Orte, Italy, Lt. Jones was severely wounded about the head and the arms when intense anti-aircraft fire heavily damaged his aircraft. Although bleeding profusely and stunned from shock, Lt. Jones, displaying great courage and fortitude remained at his bombsight and released his bombs with devastating effect upon this important center of enemy communication lines. When the severed hydraulic system failed, Lt. Jones struggled for more than five minutes in an attempt to close the open bomb-bay doors until extreme weakness forced him to seek first aid. His selfless devotion to duty and outstanding professional skill reflect great credit upon himself and the Armed Forces of the United States.

DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS to Major Harold L. McKean, Commanding Officer

HAROLD L. McKEAN, 0411716, Major, Jackson, Mississippi. For extra-ordinary achievement while participating in aerial flight as pilot of a B-26 type aircraft. Serving as formation commander or flight leader on many combat missions, Major McKean has distinguished himself through his aggressiveness and superior tactical skill. On 16 January 1944, he led a twenty-four plane formation in an attack upon the marshalling yards at Orte, Italy. Upon the approach to the target, heavy anti-aircraft fire seriously wounded his navigator, destroyed the junction box controlling all electrically operated instruments and damaged the hydraulic and gasoline lines. Realizing that the success of the mission rested heavily upon the performance of the lead ship, Major McKean determinedly held his crippled aircraft on course and enabled his bombers to cover the objective so effectively that these vital communication and supply lines were completely severed. Away from the target, Major McKean led the formation in violent evasive action through additional heavy ground fire and although without the services of his navigator, safely returned the group to his base. His steadfast devotion to duty and outstanding leadership reflect great credit upon himself and the Armed Forces of the United States.

Notes

¹ Unit War Diaries, 37th Bombardment Squadron (M), Oct 1943-June 1945, SQ-BOMB-37-HI, in USAF Collection, AFHRA, Microfiche Frame 1380.

Appendix C

Commanders of the 37th Bombardment Squadron during WWII¹

<u>Name</u>	<u>Dates</u>	<u>Note</u>
Captain Karl Baumeister	US Entry into war – 27 Jun 42.	
Major Ferrell L. Bowen	28 Jun 42 - 2 Jun 43	Rotated home.
Major Robert A. Zaiser	3 Jun 43 – 11 Jul 43	Promoted to Group Commander
Major Audie S. Wright	12 Jul 43 – 23 Sep 43	Killed in Action
Major Raymond J. Downey	24 Sep 43 – 14 Oct 43	Transferred to Group Operations
Major Harold L. McKean	15 Oct 43 – 20 Jul 44	Rotated home.
Captain Rodney S. Wright	21 Jul 44 – 26 Aug 44	Rotated home.
Captain George H. Gibbens	27 Aug 44 – 9 Apr 45	Rotated home.
Major Eugene J. McCarthy	10 Apr 45 – End of European hostilities	

Notes

¹ Unit War Diaries, 37th Bombardment Squadron (M), Oct 1943-June 1945, SQ-BOMB-37-HI, in USAF Collection, AFHRA, various.

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